

Testimony
Submitted to the
Appropriations Committee

March 9, 2009

GOVERNOR'S BILL NO. 830 AN ACT CONCERNING THE GOVERNOR'S
RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING EDUCATION

Good afternoon Senator Harp and Representative Geragosian, and fellow members of the Appropriations Committee, thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak to you today.

My name is Peggy Roell and I am Chair of the Avon Board of Education. I am here to ask the State of Connecticut to fully fund the cost of magnet school tuitions. I'm also asking you to support the commissioner of education's request to increase the subsidy that suburban districts receive for accepting urban students through the Open Choice program. The current level of state funding is not adequate to achieve the goals of the Sheff v. O'Neill desegregation case.

The Town of Avon was not a party in the Sheff litigation. Yet, understanding the importance of diverse learning communities, our taxpayers, for over 10 years, have supported the effort to desegregate Hartford Public Schools. Avon is an original partner in the University of Hartford magnet school. We have paid tuition for Avon students to participate in regional magnet school programs and we have enrolled over 50 Hartford children in Avon's schools through the Open Choice program - even as our school district has experienced a fifty percent increase in enrollment in the last 10 years and have continuously faced tight budgets because of this unprecedented growth. We currently have sixteen children enrolled in the Reggio Magnet School of the Arts which opened in Avon this fall.

Until recently, the \$2,500 Avon received from the state for each Project Choice student attending Avon's schools, was adequate to offset the tuition cost for Avon students participating in the regional magnet school program. Due to the limited amount of ECS dollars Avon receives, the incremental additional cost of the Project Choice students attending school in Avon has been primarily supported by local tax revenues.

The relative balance of the cash in from Project Choice and the cash out for magnet school tuitions ended last summer (after our 2008/09 budget was finalized). Not only are we now required to pay tuition for any K-12 student whose parents choose to send them to a magnet school, we are also required to pay tuition for Pre-K students attending magnet schools, even though we are not obligated by state statute to provide pre-K education.

As a result of the increased tuitions at the magnet schools and the tuition for pre-K students, the Avon Board of Education is facing an \$80,000 unplanned expense this current fiscal year. An unfunded mandate. This means a reduction in program services in the district. The tuition to the magnet schools will likely increase next year cutting even further into our existing programs and services.

Even without an increase in magnet school tuitions, the Avon Board of Education's proposed budget currently reflects the lay off of an administrator and 6.5 other certified staff in addition to layoffs of uncertified staff and significant program cuts. We do not have funds in our proposed budget to support these additional magnet school costs.

The issue is even more complicated than not having resources. As a result of the Parent Choice legislation, school districts no longer have control over the number of our students attending magnet schools. We also have no control over the amount of tuition we will be charged for each student. So, unlike almost every other expenditure in our budget which is put out to bid, or negotiated in some manner, magnet school tuitions are not....and worse the total bill is not determined until after the school year begins, long after our budgets are approved. In my opinion, not good fiscal responsibility.

Once the magnet school bill is received, since there are no reserve accounts to pay it from, the only option left for local school districts is to reduce other programs and expenses mid year. Not an educationally sound, nor popular option, for students, staff, parents and the local community.

All districts in the state are trying to maintain the instructional integrity and program quality in their schools in a cost effective manner while remaining sensitive and responsive to the current fiscal conditions. I am fearful, especially with the current economic situation, as Boards of Education need to make major budget reductions, it will threaten the voluntary efforts of socially conscious school districts to support the goal of encouraging children to cross district lines to reduce the racially isolated schools. Communities who have voluntarily chosen to participate in this effort should not be the ones that are punished.

If the state is serious about achieving the goals of Sheff, including improving the quality of education and seeking more opportunities for children to attend more mixed income and non-racially isolated schools, then the state must take responsibility for fully funding this effort.

Thank you for your time.